INFORMAL LEARNING SPACES FOR UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS SCHOOL: A BANGKOK PRIVATE UNIVERSITY CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Informal Learning Spaces (ILS) have been used by students for solo and group learning activities, within and outside library spaces. Many academic disciplines provide learning spaces beside classrooms, such as labs and studios, where students attending related disciplines can use these learning spaces as formal and Informal Learning Spaces (ILS). However, for business school, such types of learning spaces are normally not available. Moreover, most courses of business studies assign team projects that require group discussion types of meetings, which are difficult to conduct in a library environment. This research used a Bangkok private university as a case study to explore the behaviours and perspectives of students who attended business programs, concerning how students used ILS, on and off campus facilities, for learning activities. Research approach applied quantitative analysis through questionnaire surveys and small group interviews, during March 2018. The results showed that students used home/dorm more towards solo studies than group activities. Students applied virtual spaces to extend the functions of home/dorm for group activities. The usage of cafe and coworking spaces were more towards group activities. These results showed that besides available of virtual spaces, there were still needs for face-to-face meetings.

Keywords: Bangkok private university, Informal learning, Informal learning space, Learning spaces, Virtual spaces.
1. Introduction

Informal learning spaces are non-discipline specific spaces frequented by both staff and students for self-directed learning activities, within and outside library spaces [1]. Learning spaces do not limit only within classrooms but include specific areas set up by university [2]. These spaces should be well planned and managed to motivate learners, promote learning activity, support the collaborative and formal practice, provide personal areas, and flexible [3].

Many academic disciplines usually provide formal learning spaces other than lecture classrooms. These additional formal learning spaces include computer labs, engineering labs, film studios, architectural studios, nursing lab, for example. Students attending such disciplines can use these learning spaces not only as formal learning spaces but also as Informal Learning Spaces (ILS). However, for ‘business school’, such types of learning spaces are normally not available. Moreover, almost all courses, offered as parts of business degree curriculums, assign academic works that require collaborative and team projects. Such team projects require group works, discussion, and meeting spaces outside formal lecturer classes, which are difficult to conduct in a normal library environment. It is very interesting to hear the voices of the university’s customers, our students, who reflect their requirements for learning spaces and other activities outside classrooms.

The objective of this research was to explore the behaviours and perspectives of students who attended business programs, concerning how students used ILS for learning activities. A Bangkok Private University (BPU), Thailand, was used as a case study. The scope covered ILS (both on and off campus, and both university library and non-library spaces), learning activities (e.g., assignment/course work, solo/group studies, exam, etc.), other activities during learning days (breaks between classes, meal breaks, social interactions, etc.), environment/facilities preferred, and needs for improvement of existing ILS on the campus.

2. Literature Review

The following sections review related past research into two aspects: (a) Types of informal learning spaces and learning activities and (b) Types of environment/spaces and facilities needed.

2.1. Types of informal learning spaces and learning activities

There are many types of ILS have been identified including: (a) university libraries, (b) home, (c) social learning spaces, (d) café, and (e) virtual spaces, and (f) others.

University libraries have been contributed as informal learning spaces as well as social dimensions of learning [2, 4, 5]. According to Larsen [6], however, the way students now use the physical library in another way than before. They come to work, often in groups, and to socialize. Cunningham and Walton [7] reported a wide range of learning activities have been taken places in a Loughborough University Library’s ILS: review during exams, complete assignments and coursework, meet with colleagues/friends and conduct dissertation.

Studying at home is one of the preferred informal learning spaces, especially when working individually. However, some learners reported finding home a
difficult place to study because of the inherent distractions and it was not frequently selected as a place suitable for group work [1].

According to Sullivan [5], social learning spaces also have their role on the student engagement by fostering active learning, social interaction and belonging amongst tertiary students. In recent years, one of the most social learning spaces is ‘coworking space’, which is a shared working environment, often an office and independent activity. As stated by Foertsch [8], unlike in a typical office environment, that coworking is usually not employed by the same organization.

On and off campus cafe/catering outlet/coffee bars/canteens have been claimed as one of ILS [9, 10]. Catering outlets provide access to a small number of PCs and can be sued as a learning space without any requirement to purchase food.

Virtual spaces, online communication platforms, have also been contributed to and changing the internal nature of education [11, 12]. Web tools enable spaces for learners to extend-then-combine their own formal learning into more informal places [13].

Other types of spaces that have been reported the usage as informal learning spaces include students union, formal teaching environments such as PC labs - when they are not in use for classes [1]. In addition, special learning centres/discussion rooms are available at some institutions embedded as functions within libraries [14].

2.2. Types of environment/spaces and facilities needed

For ILS to function properly and contentedly, it requires supports from ‘environment’ and ‘facilities’.

2.2.1. Environment

Several environmental characteristics of spaces, through design, have impacts on students’ learning behaviours of social/group studies and solo studies. The design is a contributing factor to students’ perceptions of social learning spaces [4]. The study conducted by Harrop and Turpin [1] show how space was laid out influenced usage. Types of environmental characteristics include background atmosphere and architectural elements.

Background atmosphere greatly influences the students’ choice of study location. Based on a study by Hunter and Cox [10], student adapted their study habits to fit the learning spaces that they liked. Students feeling attached to specific informal learning spaces, seeing them as somewhere to discuss work without being confined by regulations [15]. As stated by Waxman [9], contrasting, students who seek privacy tend to sit in sheltered locations with architectural elements that offered a physical structure on at least one side. Learners with a preference for privacy expressed the importance of having spaces where others could not see their work, including home, and enclosed spaces such as meeting rooms [1].

2.2.2. Facilities

Facilities, here, refer to furniture and technology provided by universities. Bennet [16] and Bodnar [17] identified that students appreciate furniture, which can be adjusted to suit their needs in libraries [16, 17]. Fixed furniture, such as lecture
theatres, creates students’ feeling of restriction to spread out their belongings. As such, convenience, comfort, spreading out, and the availability of resources were seen as the main reasons for using ILS rather than libraries [1, 18]. Technology provided can enhance the popularity of ILS. As stated by Lippincott [19], a common space, named Open, at Loughborough University, was popular because of the ease of internet access [19].

3. Research Methodology

The research approach applied both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis through survey sampling. The surveys were conducted on business school students of BPU during March 2018. A survey questionnaire was created and distributed to business core courses for freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years. The questionnaires were equally distributed to each year of students. The total number of students who attended business programs were about 6,000 students. This study collected in 408 survey samplings. The qualitative through group discussions were conducted for further clarifications.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Results

The results found from the analysis include: (1) types of learning spaces and learning activities, (2) learning activities and other activities outside classrooms on campus, (3) preferred environment of ILS, (4) preferred equipment/facilities of ILS on campus, (5) open question/answers to suggest the improvements of ILS on campus, and (6) overall respondents’ satisfaction.

4.1.1. Types of learning spaces and learning activities

There were seven questions asked types of learning and other activities that students normally spent time at including: (i) between classes, (ii) do assignment/homework, (iii) do term project/team project, (iv) do group discussion, (v) study for exam/quiz, (vi) do individual project, and (vii) relax. Each question had the same five choices of learning spaces including (a) home/dormitory, (b) university library, (c) cafe, (d) coworking spaces, and (e) others. Figure 1 shows the proportion of learning spaces used for each type of learning activities.

The histogram chart in Fig. 1 consists of SEVEN stacked columns; each represents the results from each type of learning activities. Each stacked column consists of the proportion of five types of learning spaces where the learning activity took place. The first five stacked columns of learning activities were placed in the order of activities from the most ‘solo’ to the most ‘group’ activities. The last two stacked columns are other activities usually occurred on campus. It can be seen that ‘home/dormitory’ is one type of learning spaces that was in a higher to the highest usage when learning activities are towards solo activities. ‘Library’ was in lesser usage for learning activities, but was in high usage as a relax place and between classes. ‘Cafe’ was in higher usage towards ‘group’ activities. ‘coworking spaces’ or social working spaces were in high usage for ‘term projects/team projects’ and ‘group discussion’. Other learning and other spaces specified in the open answers included: student unions, sports centres, and computer labs.
There were further small group interviews with students to clarify how can ‘term project/team project’ and ‘group discussion’ be conducted at ‘home/dorm’. There are several virtual spaces/online technologies that allow group works including: google docs, line group chat, and Facebook, etc.

Fig. 1. Types of learning and other activities versus learning spaces.

4.1.2. Learning activities and other activities outside classrooms on campus

The respondents were asked to identify up to three activities that they spent their time outside classrooms on campus. The top frequency is to ‘have meals’. The lower frequency of activities were ‘break between classes’, ‘social interaction’, ‘group study’, then ‘solo study’, sequentially.

The first five columns in Fig. 2 show the proportion of each of the five activities stated. The sixth, the last column, is to sum of ‘solo and group study’ with the results of almost half of the respondents, 48.40%.

A question was asked whether the group of students, who did ‘solo’ and/or ‘group’ studies on campus, were top-grade students or not. To clarify, the study went further and analysed the GPA (grade point average) of these ‘solo and group studies on campus’ group and compared it with the GPA of ‘all respondents’, as shown in Fig. 3. The two lines of GPA, solid line for ‘all data’ and dashed line for ‘solo/group study’, are in similar proportions. However, the line for who did solo and/or group studies on campus has a little bit higher GPA between ‘2.51 to 3.50’, but has a little bit lower GPA between ‘lower than 2.0 to 2.5’ and ‘higher than 3.50’.

Fig. 2. Activities conducted in campus.

Fig. 3. GPA of all survey samplings versus GPA of the samplings who study (group/solo) on campus.
4.1.3. Preferred environment of ILS

As shown in Fig. 4, the top preferred environment is ‘place that can share idea’. The subsequent preferences are ‘place that allows eat/drink’, ‘quiet place’, ‘place that can have privacy’, and ‘place that can sleep’, sequentially. The top two are towards the socializing environment, while the last three are towards quiet and private places.

4.1.4. Needs for improvement of equipment/facilities of ILS on campus

The questionnaire asked the respondents to choose up to the top three equipment/facilities that needed to be improved. The one that needed to be fixed the most was ‘have high-speed WiFi’, 67.08% as shown on Fig. 5. There also many requirements for meeting room, 39.56%. Furniture of ILS is not enough and need to be improved, 38% for ‘have enough/comfortable chairs’ and 20.15% for ‘have practical tables’. Respondents reflected needs for ILS to open after the normal office hours at 16:30 p.m., 31.20%. Other supporting learning equipment/facilities, printing services/plug sockets/PC were also needed to be increased.

4.1.5. Open question/suggestions to improve ILS on campus

The questionnaire provided an open question that allows the respondents to make comments on how ILS on campus could be improved. There were 182 out of 408 respondents, 44.6%, who made comments. These comments were analysed into 216 suggestions, which were categorized into 12 groups for improvements, as shown in Fig. 6.

There were needs to extend the opening hours of ILS and Library; 10.57% and 3.19%, sequentially. There were also needs for more ILS/meeting rooms/quiet learning spaces/study spaces; 9.58%, 3.19%, 2.11% and 2.11%, sequentially. The quality of WiFi was also mentioned here for improvements, 3.93%. Furniture and supporting equipment, chairs/tables/plug-sockets, were also comments to upgrade quality and numbers.

4.1.6. Overall satisfaction

Although there were a lot of comments and suggestions for improvements of ILS on campus on opening hours/spaces/equipment/facilities of ILS on campus, the overall rating for ILS on campus was towards satisfaction.
As shown in Fig. 7, the sum of ‘good’ level (45.93%), ‘very good’ level (13.33%), and ‘excellent’ level (2.47%) is 61.73%. However, the ‘poor’ level (9.63%) and ‘fair’ level (28.64%) demonstrated that ILS on campus is still required a lot of improvements.

![Fig. 6. Suggestions to improve the existing ILS on campus.](image)

![Fig. 7. Overall rating of satisfactions of ILS on campus.](image)

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Relationship between home/dorm and virtual space

Virtual spaces/web tools do not exist as informal learning spaces by itself but support ‘real’ physical spaces to extend their functions as informal learning spaces. In this case, virtual space/web tools enable business programs students to use their home/dorm to extend its functionality. That is business programs students can use the home for both solo works and group works. This finding adds up the benefits of virtual spaces in relation to ILS; unlike the works by Hall (2009) that found that web tools enable spaces for learners to extend-then-combine their own formal learning into more informal places.

4.2.2. Function of library as a relaxing place

In this case study, learners used library small proportions for both solo and group studies, but in much higher proportions for relaxing and break between classes. There are a lot of past studies identified the functions of the library in the aspects.
to support learning, both solo and group work, but do not mention the function of the library as a relaxing place.

4.2.3. Needs of face-to-face collaborations
In spite that virtual space/web tools/modern technologies allow learners to work at home, there is still a number of business programs students who prefer to use ILS that allow face-to-face meetings. This is support by the results that show learners used Cafe and coworking spaces for group works in higher proportion than for solo works.

4.2.4. Quiet spaces versus meeting spaces
The results support many past research findings that preferences for learning spaces can be varied; learners who seek places to discuss work versus those who seek privacy spaces.

4.2.5. Need for improvement versus the reality
The results reveal several suggestions for BPU to improve equipment/facilities to support ILS on campus. The reality will be to what extend BPU can and should provide accommodation platforms for solo works, the group works, and relax. Important questions are that how university administrators will accept the needs, plan for the priority of needs, and manage the improvements.

5. Conclusions
This research used a Bangkok private university as a case study to explore the behaviours and perspectives of students who attended business programs, concerning how students used ILS for learning activities. Through quantitative questionnaire surveys and small group interviews, the results showed numerous insights including the usage of home/dorm more towards solo study; the relationship between home/dorm and virtual spaces; the usage of cafe and coworking spaces towards group activities; and he needs to improve ILS for both quiet spaces and discussion activities.

This study uses a Bangkok private university as a case study. The results reflect the scenario, and students’ behaviours and preferences specific to this case. However, the results lead to many questions, which are opportunities for future research. Firstly, it is interesting to study the way to use the library as a relaxing place. The other is to study the improvement process of ILS of this Bangkok private university; how university administrators will accept the needs of business programs students, plan for the priority of needs, and manage the improvements; and to what extend BPU can and should provide accommodation platforms for solo works.

References


